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ENGLAND'S FEMININE WAR WORKERS

BY LADY KENNARD

WE see her photograph in every picture-paper, and every breeze that blows wafts to our ears another tribute to her name. And yet, how few of us have met her in the flesh: the woman who works to win the war? This not for the reason that her being is but chimerical, but for the fact that she works so hard that no time is left for play. Her services are voluntarily given, she boasts no uniform, she is not even honored by a number, often she has attained no distinction save a friendly nickname, for her tasks carry her beyond the haunts where people see and are seen.

I intend to give her first place in this, my thank-offering to my sex. The others will be dealt with later: the women who work and win promotion and decorations, the women with careers. It is not for me to decry them, but, as the women who have found *remunerative* work in war, they rank but second to those who have been content to find remuneration in satisfying the need war brings for altruistic effort.

The canteen worker, for instance. Her daily drudgery began with the outbreak of hostilities, and, when the fight is over, she will drop back to where she sprang from, usually a comfortable home where beds are made for her and dishes washed. Her social standing amongst feminine war workers is like that of the dustman in peace-time occupations. Her duties take her out in all weathers to do the nastiest kind of things, she is as necessary to this new life as was the har-binger of domestic cleanliness in days of peace, and as unappreciated. Life holds for her no promise of promotion, and her job is usually accomplished at night time and towards dawn, when all the living world is near to death. Even the soldiers she serves with sandwiches and coffee have grown to regard her existence as a matter of course, and grumble mightily when a buffet they patronize turns out to be, by

chance, understaffed. Yet, how many of those soldiers have carried away her cheery: "God Speed!" as their last farewell, how many more have found her kindly sympathy their first realization of "Blighty"? I have known women—grandmothers at that—criticized as follows: "Oh, So and So?—*She* doesn't overwork herself!—yes, I believe she *does* work at a canteen" (oh, the intonation!) "but one never hears of her *doing* anything!" And then, I have helped such ladies to pack their little satchels with a few war bread sandwiches and a thermos flask, just at the hour when I myself was sitting down to a comfortable evening meal, and watched them from the window, hail a bus at the corner to take them an hour's journey to the station canteen which counts upon their presence for its being. I lived in the same house with one of them once, and, just occasionally, on raid nights, when sleep had been interrupted, I have heard her stumbling up the stairs towards three o'clock admittedly "very tired", but cheerful still, full of details about the raid, the bombs, and the delightful characteristics of the "Tommies" of the night's drafts.

More potent heroines, still less publicly acclaimed, are the scores of girls in their teens who have undertaken the same occupation in France. Nothing exciting there, mind you! No firing-line thrills, nothing of interest to see, still less of interest to do. Just the day's hard work and the difficult sleep of nights, paralyzed by cold in winter, dust stifled in the summer time. Their mails irregular, their friends forgetful, with hands coarsened and complexions spoiling, they have carried on and are continuing to carry on, thinking sometimes a little wistfully, as their letters prove, of the dances, the flirtations and the weddings happening at home.

A prototype to the above, unto whom, together with the Canteen Worker, is the highest honor due, is to be found in the Pantry V.A.D. She has passed no examinations, lacks all technical knowledge, and accepts, nevertheless, all those unpleasantnesses which are a portion of the unofficial subordinate obliged, for form's sake, to wear a uniform. All regulation V.A.D.s, secure in their regimental tabs and standing, are the first to scorn her, unto whose feet the paradise of "wards" is generally forbidden ground. Qualified nurses' probationers make her their drudge. Sisters pretend that she does not exist, and the committee which runs any hospital where she may have been gratefully accepted, long

ago, as a worker, never again consider her, except to present her with a bill for broken china when she leaves, generally because of varicose veins or physical breakdown. Yet not an officers' hospital in England but would come to a standstill without her. She knows this perfectly well, because she alone can competently judge the work she has undertaken. She grumbles a little at home, pities herself in the pantry, and laughs a little, quietly, when she reads in the newspaper of the public vote of thanks tendered to the officials of her hospital. She has plenty of proof in daily life that "The Boys" know all about it and are grateful. That is all that matters, so she—carries on!

Before turning to the salaried workers of the war, this list, which aims at a Biblical standard in its motto: "—and the last shall be first," must include the woman who stays at home to keep her house in order. Home does not necessarily imply the one that she has planned and furnished in her early married days, before the war; it is usually someone else's "home", very far away, and, from her point of view, depressingly un-homelike. She is the woman who follows the drum, and whose journeyings may drag her from Land's End to John o' Groat's. Her income is dwindling, consequently so also is her household staff, and all the while her responsibilities are growing together with her children. She does a great deal of her own house work, all her own mending, and, incidentally, knits a number of soldiers' socks. She has plenty of time for thinking, whilst her husband, once a well-to-do city clerk, tramps the country in ill-fitting puttees, wondering why he was ever born. And her thoughts turn to a future in which things cannot but grow worse. The time will come when the *raison d'être* of it all will have faded into a series of cyphers on an envelope marked: "B. E. F." and when there will not even be the occasional evenings to look forward to which still mark "his" homecoming. But, at this period, she washes the baby, or turns her seam, or tidies a cupboard and—carries on!

Mark well the fact that these three: the Canteen Worker, the Pantry V.A.D. and the Woman who follows the Drum, are practically the only war workers who have systematically held to the same job since the winter of 1914, thus proving the metal of their soul to be of purest gold. For the alloy of human nature has ever been an almost universal lack of fixity of purpose.

These are the women Victoria Crosses of the war, and the following have earned the D.S.O.:

I will write of them in the order of their coming, as best I can remember it.

The birth of the Munition Worker occurred in the dark ages. Her advent was first whispered, then publicly rumored, and only became reality to me when a school friend turned up suddenly to dinner one evening, in overalls. "You don't mean to say?" I queried aghast, "that you've—?" "Yes, I'm making fuses," she announced. "And what is a fuse?" (I had been wanting to know for weeks!) "Well, I can't quite describe it," she said, "but I'm told that I'm awfully good at making them." For the first time in the history of our acquaintance that girl had pocketmoney, for the first time since I had known her she looked contented. I do not mean to imply that the one thing resulted from the other—she was not that kind. She was almost irritatingly happy and more busy than seemed quite nice. This all happened, you see, before the days when semblance, at any rate, of occupation became a necessary passport for mutual toleration and respect.

The Munition Worker lives on, more flourishing, perhaps, but less joyous nowadays than when, as pioneer, she scorned to conform to type. Dukes' daughters and factory girls still work side by side, but they have lost something of their sense of humor through the finding of a common level. Mostly spendthrifts whilst still in embryo, they incline towards vulgar ostentation when fully fledged, but they have those most human virtues: justice and generosity. Send round a penny collecting card into a gathering of their clan, and as much benefit will accrue to the charity, provided that it be a popular one, and judged deserving, as can be mulcted at social matinées. Cheerfully tendered, moreover, and, as often as not, anonymously. I have heard it rumored that these women are spoiled, that they have been overmuch considered and over paid. It is true that welfare centres have been instituted for them in hundreds, canteens and recreation huts provided, classes offered and lecturers sent there free of charge. Surely, however, it is wiser to exaggerate the good we try to do them than to risk exaggeration of the harm they might do themselves? And the army of women that sprang forward wholeheartedly to put their shoulders to a creaking, dangerous wheel, will never do more than threaten to aban-

don it should bad times come, which cannot, at any rate, prove worse than those already sampled and surmounted!

Following closely upon the heels of the Munition Worker came the Government Clerk. She represented in pathetic hundreds the poverty-stricken ranks of the women whom life had overlooked. The bulk of those earliest volunteers who answered to the call for typists, shorthand writers, accountants and masters of foreign tongues was composed of the host of superannuated teachers, daughters who had elected to "stay at home and look after mother," and women doomed for various reasons to spinsterhood and oblivion. Imagination painted for them a roseate future comprising soft pile carpets, comfortable leather furniture and fires ever burning—an office Utopia, in short, to make up for life with a big "L," hitherto missed at home. At first they hardly realized the worth of "pay"—it was the material comfort for which they yearned. Disillusionment followed swiftly regarding this latter, but the weekly pay envelope taught them independence they had never thought to gain, plus self respect. Their juniors, better favored, less in need, marked the altered carriage of these derelicts, and instituted a veritable siege of Government Employment Bureaus. Work—paid work—was found for all, and its inauguration proved comparatively simple with results quite moderately satisfactory to the Powers at the Head.

Contemporaneous with the advent of the Munition Worker and the Government Clerk was the first appearance of the Woman in Khaki. I am not going to enlarge upon the score or so of denominations into which her original corps has since divided itself by reason, not only of its growing numbers, but also because of the immense scope of work it has undertaken in contemporary times. I have neither the space nor the technical knowledge necessary for such a dissertation. Even my unprofessional eye, however, has enabled me to judge of the extent to which she has become essential to the machinery of warfare. Equally so, my untrained ears have resounded to the tales of all that she has accomplished since those early days when one was wont to cast amused glances over small squads of perspiring women drilling in the spring sunshine of Hyde Park. That was in 1915, before conscription came. They were all "Tommies" then, these women, almost pathetic in their apeing of the training and uniform which had hitherto marked the man of war.

They are commissioned officers now, and have in their hand the organization of an army dependent upon which are the most essential supplementary parts of the machinery of the trenches. They have grown into skilled mechanics, motor drivers, transport workers, military private secretaries, makers of aeroplanes and a dozen other things. They police themselves and work their own promotion. They represent the finest, strongest, healthiest promise of our race, for they are mostly the girls who will be the mothers of the future. Their hours are long and their work is hard—yet, of all the women war-workers I have seen, they look the most contented. No one smiles at them now, and they themselves smile out most radiantly upon the new military world which they have half created.

First cousins to them are the Women in Navy Blue, born later but no less efficient. These comprise the women policemen whose work is left for guessing, but to whose services each soldier man one meets pays tribute. And together with them can be classed the "Wrens" whose duties lie with the Senior Service, but whose coming has been so recent that they have not yet had time to prove themselves as a component part of a very splendid sisterhood.

My subject would be incomplete without mention of the Women Workers on the Land. Myself, I live in London, and have had, consequently, little opportunity of judging them. But, remembering my own innate recoil from answering that particular call when it appeared in every newspaper and on every placard in the city, and visualizing my frantic search for excuses for not doing so, I can but acclaim as heroines those women and girls who went. Imagination suffices amply for depicting all that is repellent in such duties—actuality could but prove more distasteful still! Every feminine instinct is outraged by a life which brings one out of bed at dawn and throws one into it again at sunset with bones and muscles at war; in the course of it she wears unbecoming clothes, handles blistering implements and comes into direct contact with every insect that crawls at each essential turning of the sod! And yet, not only did many thousands of women throw themselves into the breach at once, but they held to their job and are holding yet. It is not even as if they were well paid, for they earn but the meanest laborer's wage. Perhaps it is the fact that they are manipulating the very soil that fathers, brothers and husbands are

dying to defend which has given them this power to carry on.

I have purposely reserved my epilogue for treating of the Nursing Service. No written words, however, could hope to do justice to women whose records have been graven in marble and preserved in the annals of empire. Tribute has been paid them in full measure by the only beings whose tendering could have been, by the nurses themselves, appreciated: namely, by the generals, officers and men for whom they have worked and, sometimes, died. Women like myself, debarred through force of circumstances from joining their ranks at the outbreak of war, have thereby forfeited the right even to acclaim them, except silently and in their prayers.

But the work of the regulation V. A. D.s who are their subordinates and destined one day to fill their ranks is still a fit subject for my pen. This work is undertaken, often without pay, in England and in France, by women and girls who flocked from every forgotten nook of the Empire in the earliest days of the war, and clamored for patriotic occupation. Such an army required many months of strenuous organization, and the only persons who could be spared for the task had to be preliminarily chosen from the units of the army itself. Confusion and misunderstandings came as an unavoidable result of amateurish legislation, and thereunto can be directly traced the multiplicity of carping criticism which this admirable institution has had to bear. All contumely, however, has died a natural death before the universal efficiency reigning now. The V. A. D.s are divided into numbered regiments, and on their shoulder-straps this number gleams, together with an initial, marking the town of origin. They have their colonels (or commandants), captains and non-commissioned officers. They wear an arm stripe for each year's service, and are in all things, and at all times, subject to strict military discipline, any infringement of which would be promptly reported to headquarters and dealt with there. Their scope of work covers extensive ground. According to rank, they may be deputed to any kind of occupation, from that of commandant of a hospital to that of ward maid. Some of their duties are civilian ones, such as office keeping, accounts, etc.; others relate entirely to the nursing profession. All depends upon a few preliminary first aid "exams" which some of them have passed, and others not. The only difference between these "official V. A. D.s" and those "unofficial," eulogized in my earlier paragraph, is to be

found in the fact that the former have been officially enrolled at headquarters and appointed to a regiment or "detachment," as it is called, whereas their prototypes have missed this recognition through laziness or through ignorance, as the case may be. The official V. A. D., provided that she has the necessary qualifications and inclination, can become a hospital probationer after a set period of training, after which she passes into the eminence of the nursing profession, whither this article does not claim to follow her.

Let the *envoi* of appreciation which, it is hoped, will spring to the hearts of all who read these pages, be sent to the social workers of the war. I have placed them last upon the list so that they may obtain true worth of gratitude for all that they have done.

Does contemporary life admit of anything more suicidally wearisome than an hour spent in the querulous, treacherous atmosphere of a committee meeting? Or is there anything more unacceptable to the average and entirely untrained feminine intellect than the responsibility of organization? And yet the days of just those women whose career and training have fitted them for nothing but continuous pleasure are spent in "getting through" committee meetings and "getting up" entertainments, flag days, etc. They have given their men—gave these, in fact, more spontaneously in the first days of the war than did, in proportion, the middle and lower class; they have given an enormous percentage of their wealth; they have given, and continue to give, in ever increasing ratio, their time. And what, in this world, remains more precious than this same time, once the men have been taken and the money dwindles? One can go still further and point out that they have set an example of will power, fortitude and endurance which will, as much as anything accomplished by all the rest of the men and women of England put together, enable the nation to carry on to victory!

LADY KENNARD.